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TERMS OF RELATIONSHIP AND THE LEVIRATE

By E. SAPIR

REVIVED interest has been manifested of late in the relation which exists between systems of consanguinity and affinity on the one hand, and specific types or features of social organization on the other. It is to Rivers that we chiefly owe this revival of interest and it is he who, by discussion and example based chiefly on Melanesian material, has conclusively shown that many groupings of kinship terms are best understood as expressive of particular types of marriage. True, many of Rivers' inferences seem far-fetched and there is no necessity of following him in detail, but his main argument is certainly sound.¹

A widespread marriage custom among American Indians, and other peoples as well, is that of the levirate, in other words the custom by which a man has the privilege or, more often, duty of marrying the widow of his deceased brother and of bringing up the offspring

¹ Lowie has tried to show that Rivers' line of argument is in many cases too exclusive in character, that he has explained by a specific form of marriage what would equally well result from a more general feature, that of group exogamy. It seems to me, however, that Lowie's own arguments are in part invalidated by his failure to show why only certain relationships covered by the same exogamic rule are included under a single term. In not at the same time defining the reasons for specific delimitation he may prove too much. Personally I believe that the factors governing kinship nomenclature are very complex and only in part capable of explanation on purely sociological grounds. In any event, I do not seriously believe that thoroughly satisfactory results can be secured without linguistic analysis of kinship terms. Moreover, for the proper historical perspective we must have some feeling for the lack of strict accord between linguistic and cultural change. This means that an existing nomenclature may be retained, at least for a time, in the face of sociological developments requiring its modification. Direct sociological interpretation of descriptive kinship data may be as unhistorical as any other mode of direct interpretation of descriptive cultural facts. However, the purpose of this brief paper is not a polemic or broadly methodological one. It aims merely to call attention to a specific type of marriage as determining part of the kinship nomenclature. Some of the facts instanced in the text are instructive because, without other evidence, one might have inferred from them the actual or former existence of group exogamy. This inference, fortunately, we know to be impossible for the Yana and Chinook.

of their union in his own household. Correlative to this is the custom by which a man has the privilege or duty of marrying the as yet unmarried sister of his deceased wife. For convenience we shall consider these two customs as different forms of the levirate. How can the levirate form of marriage find expression in kinship nomenclature? Obviously in two distinct ways. We may look upon the levirate as an accomplished fact, in which case it remains to define step-relationship in terms of the nepotic relationship, *i. e.*, step-father as uncle, step-mother as aunt, step-child as nephew or niece. A reflection of the levirate in nomenclature naturally demands the identification of the step-father and step-mother with the paternal uncle and maternal aunt respectively in such tribes as possess distinct terms for paternal and maternal uncle, and paternal and maternal aunt; correlatively, in those tribes that distinguish between brother's and sister's children we must look for an identification of the step-child with the man's brother's child and the woman's sister's child. Or, secondly, we may look upon the levirate as a potential fact, in which case it remains to define certain nepotic and ensuing relationships in terms of the filial (and fraternal) relationship, *i. e.*, paternal uncle as father, maternal aunt as mother, man's brother's child as son and daughter, woman's sister's child as son and daughter, children of father's brother and mother's sister as brothers and sisters (as distinguished from "real" cousins, *i. e.*, cross-cousins). We may also expect to find a man's sister-in-law and a woman's brother-in-law referred to as wife and husband respectively. I propose to show that such peculiarities of kinship nomenclature actually follow, as consequences of the levirate, among the Upper Chinook¹ and the Yahi or Southern Yana.²

The identification of step-relationship with the nepotic relationship is complete among the Upper Chinook. The nepotic relationships recognized by these Indians are as follows:—

¹ Wishram tribe, in Southern Washington. Data taken from as yet unpublished material secured at Yakima reserve in 1905. For orthography of Wishram terms see my "Wishram Texts," *Publications of the American Ethnological Society*, Vol. 2, 1909.

² In northern California. Data taken from material recently (summer of 1915) obtained from Ishi, the last known survivor of the tribe. Data, as yet unpublished, on the kinship terms of the Northern and Central Yana were obtained in 1907. For orthography of Yana see my "Yana Texts," *Univ. Calif. Publ. Am. Arch. Ethn.* Vol. 9, 1910.

- i-mu*¹ "paternal uncle" (vocative *amut*).
i-lɛm "maternal uncle"² (vocative *alɛm*).
*a-lak*¹ "paternal aunt" (vocative *alak*).
a-gutɕ "maternal aunt" (vocative *agutɕ* or *aqxôda*).
i-wulɕ "man's brother's son; woman's sister's son" (vocative *qxɛwulɕ*).
*a-wulɕ*³ "man's brother's daughter; woman's sister's daughter" (vocative *qxɛwulɕ*).
i-latɕan "man's sister's son" (vocative *qxɛlatɕən*).
*a-latɕan*³ "man's sister's daughter" (vocative *qxɛlatɕən*).
i-ikiu "woman's brother's son."
*a-ikiu*³ "woman's brother's daughter."

The step-relationships which are identical with certain of these terms are:—

- i-mut* "step-father."
a-gutɕ "step-mother."
i-wulɕ "(man's or woman's) step-son."
*a-wulɕ*³ "(man's or woman's) step-daughter."

These facts speak for themselves. Their dependence on the levirate is too obvious to call for extended discussion. I need only add that the levirate itself is known to have been in force among most or all of the tribes of Washington and Oregon. We may infer with some degree of plausibility, for the Upper Chinook, that it was the very custom of the levirate, more specifically the fact that both the man's brother's child and the woman's sister's child were alike potentially the step-children, that was responsible for the grouping of these two relationships under a single term in contrast to the distinctive terms for the man's sister's child and the woman's brother's child.

Fully as instructive are the Yahi data.⁴ They are all the more

¹ *i-* is masculine prefix, *a-* is feminine prefix. In actual usage the terms are practically always provided with possessive elements, e.g., *i-ya-mut* "his paternal uncle," *a-ga-wulɕ* "her sister's daughter."

² Boas gives *i-tata* for this relationship in Lower Chinook. In Wishram this term is used by little children for "(older) brother."

³ These terms are identical, differing only in the gender prefix.

⁴ Ishi, the informant, spoke very little English, but I consider the full data on kinship terms that I obtained from him, aside from a few doubtful points, as thoroughly reliable. This is due to the fact that the terms were collected very slowly and with the utmost care and circumspection, with repeated checking-up whenever opportunity was offered: further to the fact that data already obtained from the Northern Yana

significant in that the informant made it perfectly clear that he himself looked upon the facts that we are about to consider as simply another way of saying that it was customary for the widow to marry her former husband's brother and for the widower to marry his former wife's sister. The Yahi terms for parents and children, in so far as they are necessary for our argument, are:—

galsi "father" (vocative *galsinā*, *galsī*).

ganna "mother" (vocative *gannā*).

'i'sip!a "son" (literally "little man") or *'i'sip!ai'amauyāhi* (literally "person who is little man").

mari'mip!a "daughter" (literally "little woman") or *mari'mip!ai'amauyāhi* (literally "person who is little woman").

The terms involving the nepotic relationship are:—

galsi "paternal uncle" (vocative *galsinā*, *galsī*).

u'dji'yauna "maternal uncle" (vocative *u'dji'yaunā*, *u'dji'you*).²

mucdi "paternal aunt" (vocative *mucdī*).

ganna "maternal aunt" (vocative *gannā*).

'i'sip!a "man's brother's son; woman's sister's son" (vocative *'i'sip!anā*, *'i'sip!ā*).

mari'mip!a "man's brother's daughter; woman's sister's daughter" (vocative *mari'mip!anā*, *mari'mip!ā*).

u'dji'yauna "man's sister's son" (vocative *u'dji'yaunā*); "man's sister's daughter" (vocative *u'dji'you*).

mucdi "woman's brother's son, daughter" (vocative *mucdī*).

These lists show that the paternal uncle, as a potential father, is termed father; and the maternal aunt, as a potential mother, mother. As a necessary correlate of this we find that the man's brother's son and daughter, and the woman's sister's son and daughter, as potential children, are termed son and daughter. On the

helped me to follow the informant. The many agreements in nomenclature between the Yahi and Northern Yana systems are in no case due to suggestion on my part. The work was rendered possible by the use of counters, differing in appearance for males and females, arranged in the form of a genealogical tree; this device put the whole investigation on a directly visible footing. My familiarity with Northern and Central Yana (by that time also of Yahi) naturally also helped, though the language of the discussion itself was a crude jargon composed of English, quasi-English, and Yahi.

¹ The vocative in *-nā* is used by males, that in a final lengthened vowel (or diphthong) by females. This applies to all other cases in which two vocative forms are given.

² Related to *u'dji-* "to be old."

other hand, the maternal uncle and the paternal aunt are designated by distinctive terms, the correlative nephew or niece being in each case designated by the same term. In other words, the kinship terms involved in the nepotic relation fall into two very distinct groups: such as, through the custom of the levirate, have become identified with the filial relation and recognize the difference of generation, and such as enter into reciprocal pairs in which the difference of generation is not recognized. The latter type of kinship term also includes the terms for grandparents and grandchildren.

There is, furthermore, a specific term applied to the man's brother's son or daughter, *wa'dāt'imauna* (plural *yēidāt'imauna*). The analysis of this term, however, would seem again to show dependence on the levirate. *wa'*-, to which *yēi*- corresponds as plural, is a verb stem meaning "to sit" but apparently also, when followed by an incorporated noun stem, conveying the idea of "to have, consider as"; *dāt'i* is a term for "child," regardless of sex; *-mauna* is participial. The term would therefore seem to mean "had, considered as own child," *i. e.*, potential son or daughter according to the levirate. The Northern Yana term for the man's brother's son is the cognate *wadāt'imauna*, for the man's brother's daughter *wadāt'imaumari'mi*, which is the same term compounded with the word for woman, *mari'mi*. A division into two kin groups of necessity prevails also in the cousin relationship. Cross-cousins, *i. e.*, cousins related through parents of opposite sex, are designated by special terms (*'ō'yanmauna* and *'a'yansiya*; their exact definition does not concern us here), while cousins related through parents of like sex are brothers and sisters. In other words, if my paternal uncle and maternal aunt are my potential father and mother, their children must be my potential brothers and sisters. The nomenclature for the fraternal relationship, including its application to cousins, is as follows:—

du't'yauna "man's older brother" (vocative *du't'yaunā*); also "paternal uncle's son older than male self, maternal aunt's son older than male self."

t'let'yauna "man's younger brother" (vocative *t'let'yaunā*); also "paternal uncle's son younger than male self, maternal aunt's son younger than male self."

mari'mi'yauna "man's sister" (vocative *mari'mi'ya'u*); also "man's paternal uncle's daughter, man's maternal aunt's daughter."

'i'si'yauna "woman's brother" (vocative *'i'si'ya'u*); also "woman's paternal uncle's son, woman's maternal aunt's son."

dul'mari'mi "woman's older sister" (vocative *dul'mari'mi*); also "paternal uncle's daughter older than female self, maternal aunt's daughter older than female self."

!let'womāri'mi "woman's younger sister" (vocative *!let'womāri'mi*); also "paternal uncle's daughter younger than female self, maternal aunt's daughter younger than female self."

As indicated in detail, the terms "older" and "younger" refer to the relative ages of the parties directly involved in the fraternal relationship, not to the relative ages of their parents.¹

The levirate is further reflected in the Yahi kinship system in the terms for the wife's sister and the husband's brother, which, as applying to potential wife and husband, are identical with the terms for these:—

'i'si "husband" (literally "man, male"); also "husband's brother."

mari'mi "wife" (literally "woman"); also "wife's sister."

Whether these terms also apply to the woman's sister's husband and the man's brother's wife respectively I do not know, as I have no data on this point, but it seems quite likely from the general analogies of the Yahi system that this is the case. This would be further confirmed by the fact that in Northern Yana a single term (*u'nai-yāna*) is used for the wife's sister, the man's brother's wife, the husband's brother, and the woman's sister's husband; this term would thus seem to be about equivalent to "potential spouse." On the other hand, the wife's brother, the man's sister's husband, the husband's sister, and the woman's brother's wife are each designated, in both Northern Yana and Yahi, by a distinctive term; these terms differ only phonetically in the two dialects.

The influence of the levirate on Yahi kinship nomenclature may be still further pursued in certain other terms of affinity. The paternal uncle's wife and the maternal aunt's husband are not

¹ As is the case in other kinship systems, e.g., that of the Takelma and Nootka. Thus, among the Nootka, the older brother's or older sister's son A is the "older brother" of his or her younger brother's or younger sister's son B, whether A is actually older or younger than B.

typical potential mother and father respectively, but the former, as the potential father's wife, may become a step-mother (or better perhaps co-mother); while the latter, on the death of one's brotherless father, may take the widow to wife and thus become a step-father. However, the terms "mother" and "father" are not respectively used for the paternal uncle's wife and the maternal aunt's husband. The special terms in use for these relationships are:—

p'êmo'o "paternal uncle's wife" (vocative *p'êmo'onā*, *p'êmo'ô*).

âp'dju'wīyauna "maternal aunt's husband" (vocative *âp'dju'wīyaunā*).

The significance of the term *p'êmo'o* for our problem will become apparent in a moment. While the *âp'dju'wīyauna* himself is not named so as to refer to the levirate, it is highly significant as indicative of this custom that he was said by Ishi to address his wife's children as his own children, thus implying a potential fatherhood in himself.¹ Equally significant is the term applied by a woman to her husband's brother's child, *dāt'ip!a* (vocative *dāt'ip!ā*), for this is simply the diminutive of *dāt'i* "child." In other words, as the potential step-mother (or co-mother, for we are dealing with a polygamous society), she addresses her husband's brother's children as her children.²

We may now take up the Yahi terms for the step-relationship. They are:—

wa'nimāsi "step-father; man's step-child" (vocative *wa'nimāsinā*, *wa'nimāsi*).

p'êmo'o "step-mother" (vocative *p'êmo'onā*, *p'êmo'ô*).

dāt'ip!a "woman's step-child" (vocative *dāt'ip!ā*).

The last term, in spite of its literal meaning ("little child"), is used by a woman even for a grown-up step-child. The most striking point about this step-nomenclature is the identity of the step-mother-step-child relation with that of the paternal uncle's wife

¹ I must hasten to add, however, that Ishi's statements on this point were not such as to leave absolutely no doubt as to his true meaning.

² Whether *dāt'ip!a* is an inclusive term for *i'sip!a* "son" and *mar'i'mip!a* "daughter," as its etymology implies, or is restricted in use to this and the step-relation mentioned further on, I do not know. In Northern and Central Yana *dāt'i* is the regular term for "child," but Ishi considered this word, without the diminutive suffix, as peculiar to those dialects.

to the husband's brother's child, a clear indication of one form of levirate marriage. The term *wa'nimāsi*, which is used reciprocally, finds no parallel, so far as my data go, in the Yahi kinship system, but comparison with Northern Yana demonstrates that it too is symptomatic of the levirate—and in a manner, indeed, directly comparable to the Upper Chinook usage. Its Northern Yana cognate is *un'ima* (vocative *un'imanā*), which means "paternal uncle." This correspondence is of course indicative of the direct and most typical form of levirate, the marriage by a man of his brother's widow. It further implies the former use in Yahi of *wa'nimāsi* for the paternal uncle, its displacement, under the influence of the levirate, by the term for "father," and its survival in a specialized sense ("step-father").

This leads us to a point of considerable interest, the geographical distribution of the kinship terms implying the levirate. For some reason which I am at present unable to give, the identification of the paternal uncle with the father and of the maternal aunt with the mother is peculiar to Yahi, while the Northern and Central Yana have distinct terms for each of the four types of uncle and aunt. The Northern Yana terms are:—

un'ima "paternal uncle."

udji'auna "maternal uncle" (cf. Yahi *u'dji'yauna*).

muxdi "paternal aunt" (cf. Yahi *mucdi*).

garaina "maternal aunt."

The terms *un'ima* and *garaina* are not capable of analysis and must therefore be of very considerable antiquity. Moreover there was good internal evidence in Yahi, as we saw, pointing to the former existence in that dialect of *wa'nimāsi* in the sense of "paternal uncle." From these facts we conclude that the Yahi peculiarities of terminology are secondary and that the influence upon it of the levirate was not on the wane, but on the increase. It would be highly interesting to have the Northern Maidu kinship system available for comparison in order to determine whether this emphasis on the levirate is due to a southern influence, but unfortunately such material has not been made accessible.

The influence of the levirate on kinship terminology is doubtless

traceable in other systems, and perhaps much of what has been explained with reference to other causes is ascribable to it. I should certainly not be disposed to hold, for instance, that the merging of lineal and collateral lines of descent necessarily points to the custom of group exogamy. The levirate may no doubt not infrequently be examined as an equally or more plausible determining influence.¹ Various features of a kinship system may be interpreted as symptomatic of the levirate, but care must always be taken to see whether in any specific case other explanations may not be more appropriate. One such symptomatic feature is the classification of cousins related through parents of like sex as brothers and sisters. The classification of all cousins as brothers and sisters, as among the Nootka, is naturally of no significance in connection with the levirate. A typical instance of the former mode of cousin classification I find among the Takelma, a tribe of southern Oregon. Among these Indians the term for "younger brother" (*wā^a-xa*) was also applied to the father's younger brother's son and to the mother's younger sister's son; the term for "older brother" (*op-xa*) also to the father's older brother's son and to the mother's older sister's son; the term for "younger sister" (*t'awā^a-xa*) also to the father's younger brother's daughter and to the mother's younger sister's daughter; and the term for "older sister" (*t'op-xa*) also to the father's older brother's daughter and to the mother's older sister's daughter. The cross-cousins, on the other hand, are classed partly with the paternal uncle and maternal aunt and partly under a distinctive kinship term. It may well be significant in connection with these facts that the levirate was obligatory among the Takelma.

The identification in nomenclature of the wife's sister or man's brother's wife with the wife, and of the husband's brother or woman's sister's husband with the husband, is also good presumptive evidence of the presence of the levirate. Thus, for the Tlingit, Swanton expressly states: "A woman's sister's husband was called

¹ To avoid misconception, I wish expressly to state that I do not consider the explanation here given of certain features of kinship terminology to hold generally, but only in the two groups of cases specifically dealt with. Other possible applications of my line of argument must be examined on their merits.

husband; and a wife's sister, wife, because in case of the wife's death, the widower had a right to marry her sister."¹ That this "right" was really a duty and that both forms of levirate marriage are customary among the Tlingit is indicated by the following quotation from a recent work on the tribe:—²

The levirate custom regulates many marriages; that is, when a brother dies some one of his surviving brothers must take his widow to wife. . . . On the other hand, if the wife dies, then a sister of the deceased, or a close relative, must be given to the surviving husband for a wife.

How much a matter of course the levirate is with the Tlingit may be gathered from further remarks of the author:—

In levirate marriages no presents are passed from the man's people to the people of the woman he takes to wife, for this is only making good his loss. The surviving husband has the right even to select a married sister of his deceased wife. If this is done, she must leave her husband and become the widower's wife. Or the widow has the right to select even a married brother of her deceased husband. And if this is done, the husband must leave his wife and children and become the widow's husband.³ The writer is acquainted with more cases than one of this kind.⁴

In several Shoshonean languages there are similar examples of nomenclature. Thus, in Shoshone the term *neg-wi* "my husband; my wife," means also "my brother's wife" (male speaking) and "my husband's brother."⁵ Further, in Southern Paiute the terms *naiŋ-quma-n*ⁱ "my sister's husband; my husband's brother" (female speaking) and *naim-piŋwa-n*ⁱ "my brother's wife; my wife's sister" (male speaking) are evidently derivative forms of *quma-n*ⁱ "my husband" and *piŋwa-n*ⁱ "my wife" respectively and probably signify something like "my co-husband, my co-wife," or "my possible husband, wife." Many other examples could doubtless be found in America of this type of nomenclature. Among the Shoshonean tribes of the Plateau, aside from the Hopi, there

¹ See J. R. Swanton, "Tlingit, Handbook of American Indian Languages," *Bureau of American Ethnology*, Bulletin 40, p. 196.

² See Livingston F. Jones, *A Study of the Tlingits of Alaska*, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1914, p. 129.

³ Presumably not in earlier days, when polygamy was practised. E. S.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 130.

⁵ Information obtained at Uintah Reserve, Utah, from Charlie Mack, summer of 1909.

can be no talk of group exogamy. The levirate is ready to hand as a plausible explanation.

Terms denoting step-relationship are also peculiarly apt to be symptomatic of the levirate, as we have seen. I believe that this brief study has served to accentuate the special importance in a study of the relation between kinship and social organization of considering the nomenclature of step-relationship.

GEOLOGICAL SURVEY,
OTTAWA, CANADA.